

The real reason some people are instantly likable

Small signals of warmth can dramatically change how people respond to you.



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by [Francesca Tighinean](#)

I was at a networking event a few years ago, making the kind of small talk that makes you question your entire personality. Everyone's eyes were darting around the room. Conversations stalled after 30 seconds, and the energy in the place was restless, performative, and slightly desperate. In other words, it was a completely normal networking event.

What struck me was the paradox of it: Every single person in that room wanted to connect, yet nobody was managing to. You'd think that if both people want the same thing, getting there would be the easy part. Clearly,

it wasn't.

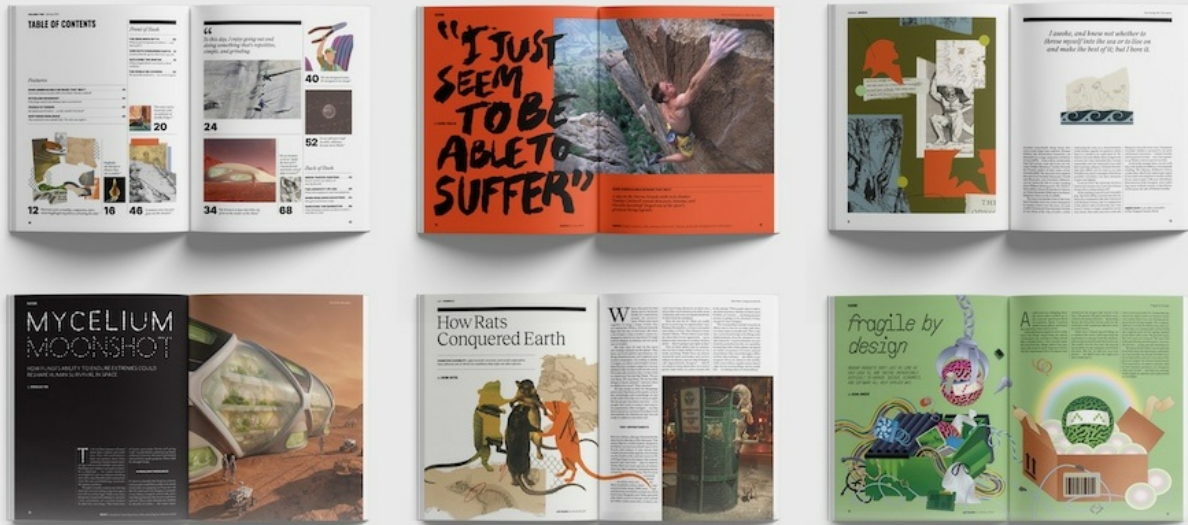
After about half an hour, a woman standing nearby turned to me with a completely relaxed smile and said, "These events are always so awkward, aren't they?"

I felt my shoulders drop immediately. We started talking and couldn't stop. Other people drifted over. By the end of the night, there was a full circle of people gravitating around her, lighting up as they spoke to her, following her as she moved around the room.

She hadn't been the most impressive person there, or the funniest, or the most confident. And yet she was without question the most magnetic person in the room. So what had she actually done?

The answer turns out to be simpler and more counterintuitive than I expected — and it has nothing to do with confidence, charisma, or anything you're born with. It starts long before you walk into the room.

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The prophecy you didn't know you were making

Every single social interaction you have is quietly shaped by a prediction you didn't know you were making. Before you've spoken a word, your nervous system has already decided how the interaction is going to go, whether the person in front of you will like you or not.

This set of expectations is rooted in your history: every interaction where

you were rejected or accepted, welcomed or left out. Your first childhood crush saying no. The job interview where you could feel yourself losing them halfway through. Those experiences shape your identity, leading you to think, “I am the kind of person people don’t warm to” or “I am the kind of person who connects easily.” And that identity becomes expectation.

Research by Danu Anthony Stinson and colleagues calls this the “acceptance prophecy” — the psychological phenomenon where your expectation of being accepted or rejected subtly shapes your behavior, which in turn influences whether others actually accept or reject you.

Imagine this: Alex walks into a social event carrying a belief built over years — that people don’t really like him. It’s a belief informed by a handful of real experiences: the colleague who never includes him in lunch plans; the group chat where he always feels slightly on the periphery. So tonight he tries not to be a burden. He listens more than he speaks, gives brief polite answers because he doesn’t want to take up too much of someone’s time, and checks his phone when the conversation pauses. In his mind, he’s being considerate. In reality, he’s protecting himself from a rejection he’s already decided is coming.

People perceive his invisible walls. His short responses feel distant, and his hesitation comes across as disinterest. After a few minutes, people move on to conversations that feel easier. And Alex thinks, “*See? No one likes me. I knew it.*” What he doesn’t realize is that he likely created the very outcome he feared.

Crucially, this is not a character flaw. It is the nervous system doing exactly what it evolved to do. The same alarm that fired when Alex noticed he wasn't included in lunch plans at work is now going off in a room full of strangers. His brain is trying to protect him from a rejection that probably isn't coming — pushing him to withdraw in ways that make connection harder. Once he recognizes this, something can shift.

Across the room, Alex spots Mary, who is drawing people in effortlessly. From where Alex is standing, she looks like someone who was simply born magnetic.

But Mary walked in carrying a completely different story. She grew up in a lively household where connection came easily. Last month, people queued to talk to her after a conference. Over time, those experiences built a different belief: that people generally enjoy her company. So she walks in curious rather than cautious. She holds eye contact a little longer, asks questions, and stays present for the answers, shares something real without calculating whether it's impressive enough. She is warm. People respond exactly as they always have, reinforcing the belief she arrived with.

When you enter a social situation, you are almost always carrying a quiet prediction: Will these people like me? If the answer leans toward yes, your behavior opens. If it leans toward no, it contracts. And those small shifts in behavior often determine the entire outcome of the interaction.

The outsized power of warmth

What separates Mary from Alex, and the magnetically likable from everyone else, isn't status, good looks, or wit. According to Stinson's research, the strongest predictor of whether strangers wanted to accept someone was interpersonal warmth.

In the study, participants recorded a short video in which they introduced themselves to a new social group, and independent observers watched the videos before deciding how much they wanted to befriend each person. Participants who appeared engaged, responsive, and comfortable in the interaction, maintaining eye contact and seeming open rather than inhibited, were far more likely to be liked.

This aligns with decades of research on how we judge one another. According to Susan Fiske's Stereotype Content Model, we size people up along two dimensions within seconds of meeting them: warmth and competence. And while both matter, warmth comes first. For evolutionary reasons, the brain asks "Can I trust this person?" before it ever gets to "Can I respect this person?" You could be the most accomplished person in the room, but if people don't perceive you as warm, they simply won't want to be around you.

How to be warmer in your social life

1. Be the welcoming one

In an interview I did with psychologist Dr. Julie Smith, she said: “Don’t wait to be welcomed. Be the welcomer.”

Every person at a social event is waiting to feel included, accepted, and welcomed. They’re all standing there with their invisible walls up, hoping someone will make the first move. Magnetic people don’t wait for that. They are the provider of it. And by focusing on making others feel welcomed, they become the most welcome person in the room.

Shifting your focus from how you’re coming across to the person in front of you gets you out of your own head and into genuine connection.

2. Share a small vulnerability

In the second part of Stinson’s study, the researchers tested their hypothesis that socially anxious people don’t actually lack warmth — they suppress it in high-stakes social situations as a way of protecting themselves from rejection. The self-protective withdrawal feels safe, but it comes at a cost: To everyone else in the room, it reads as coldness.

But what if that withdrawal could be interrupted? Before pairing up participants, researchers gave them a handwritten note, supposedly from their partner, saying: “...when I meet someone new (like now!), I find myself worrying about whether the other person likes me...”

That small admission of social vulnerability was enough to lower the perceived risk of the interaction, and participants who read the note became less anxious and noticeably warmer. They ended up being liked

just as much as the most confident people in the room.

This aligns with a landmark meta-analysis by Collins and Miller, which found three patterns operating at the same time: people who disclose more tend to be liked more; we disclose more to people we already like; and, perhaps most interestingly, we actually begin to like someone more simply because we have disclosed to them.

Before opening up, most of us wait for the other person to make connection feel safe. But the research suggests it works the other way around — you opening up is what makes it feel safe for them.

So the next time you're talking to someone new, try saying something like, "I always feel a bit awkward at events like this." These small disclosures humanize you, and they give the other person permission to drop their guard too. Someone has to go first, so it might as well be you.

3. Expect to be liked

Your expectation of rejection is your biggest obstacle. When you walk into a room assuming you won't be liked or that you're not enough, you begin behaving in ways that make that true.

The most practical way to interrupt the cycle is to replace the fear with a more accurate reading of reality. Most people in any room are not looking for someone to reject; they're hoping to connect.

It also helps to remember that most of us dramatically overestimate how harshly we're being judged. Psychologists call this the spotlight effect —

the tendency to believe we are far more noticed and scrutinized than we actually are. In reality, everyone in the room is too busy worrying about themselves.

4. Show warmth signals

Warmth isn't a personality type, but a set of behaviors that can be learned.

In practice, that looks like making eye contact instead of scanning the room. Leaning in rather than keeping a polite distance. Responding to what someone actually said rather than waiting for your turn to speak. Asking a follow-up question. Laughing when something is genuinely funny. Sharing something real when the moment calls for it.

A useful trick is to think about how you are around someone you're completely comfortable with: a close friend, a sibling, someone you've known for years. Imagine that ease, that body language, that way of talking without monitoring yourself. Then try to bring a little of that into the room you're about to enter.

Looking back at that networking event, the woman who changed the energy in the room wasn't doing anything extraordinary. She simply did what most of us are too nervous to do: she dropped the armor first. Connection starts the moment someone decides to stop protecting themselves and make it safe for others to do the same.

So before your next social situation, remember that most people in that room are not there to judge you. They are hoping someone will make it

easy. Be that person. Expect connection, relax your body, and make the first warm move — a genuine question, an honest observation, even a simple admission that you feel a little awkward.

Someone has to lower the wall first. Magnetic people are simply the ones who decide that person is them.

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